

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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RURAL POETRY IN AMERICA

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By Caroline B. Sherman*

It is not by chance that a leading rural poet writes of holiness in its varied aspects. It is one of his principal themes. He sees holiness where few would look for it, or see it after looking. To him it is that force in life or death or nature or humankind that transfixes our perceptions, for however brief a moment. When it endures and continues to exert its hold, the enthrallment is just that much more than mankind has reason to demand.

Robert P. Tristram Coffin epitomized this sense of the holy in varied forms of rural life in the title of the volume that brought him the Pulitzer prize for poetry in 1936, Strange Holiness. In this volume, Coffin discovers this mystical element in the eyes of dying creatures, in voices of birds, in the voice of thunder, in a lamplighted window, in little children by the fire, in the unrolling panorama of wide reaches of land. Yet the book is simple and direct. In many poems it is even practical: In the Barn in Winter, The Barn in Summer, Advice to a Young Farmer. To be sure the last named deals with wisdoms rather than facts.

In his next volume, Salt Water Farm, published less than two years later, a larger number are farm poems but the glimpse of the divine as revealed in even homely phases of farm life are many.

This kinship with the element in life that touches transfiguration is Coffin's wellspring. To our enrichment, he always relates it to the daily things and events of plain country life. And he does this with an economy of lines that can make his poetry an easy and natural part of the reading of any literate man or woman.

For Coffin's feet are squarely on the ground—even squarely on the difficult rocky soil of coastal Maine. Scarcely a poem but shows it. Most of his writing is localized yet it possesses the touch that makes it universal. He is aware of the stark aspects of nature. It is a background from which he can focus the more sharply on these flashes he finds of spirit and beauty.

"Once or twice this side of death,
Things can make one hold his breath---."

Thus although they are brief and direct and although they deal with everyday subjects, these poems lift the reader out of himself and show him more than his own eyes are likely to discover.

Coffin is not nostalgic. When he writes of primitive country ways it is in recognition of their inherent values in those places where they still exist. He knows these places to be far more frequent than many suspect. But wherever the country is unspoiled, he finds that it feeds the spirit of those who are aware.

"There is such relevance that death and mirth
Seem equally an anthem of the earth."

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It is better to read a little of Coffin's verse at a time than to do a whole book at once, for too many are filled with these quotable rhymed couplets which are effective when sparsely used but which cloy a reader who is accustomed to varied fare. Each of the books does contain varied rhythm and occasionally discards rhyme entirely. It is hoped that he will work toward more rugged forms in keeping with his rough topography and unsophisticated people. He can do it--he does. First Flight conveys unrhymed the swift movement and swoop of the airship, the electrified wonder of the man on wings. It sustains for pages the sense of buoyancy and enthusiasm that Coffin's shorter poems are likely to suggest more briefly, and that distinguishes him from his brother poet, Robert Frost, although their writing is otherwise not unlike. It is characteristic of Coffin that even this paean of the air is in fact a song of the earth as it unrolls beneath his flight.

In Robert Frost's work the divine spark is likely to be translated into a steady glow, so warm and steadfast that it is a long way from flame. It is inherent in the poet and the frugal country life of which he writes. It does not excite the spontaneous wonder that is Coffin's frequent attribute. Frost's is rather a calm deductive working out of thought built on homely foundations. Thus in the dedication of A Further Range, his volume of new verse, "---beyond the White Mountains were the Green; beyond both were the Rockies, the Sierras, and, in thought, the Andes and the Himalayas--range beyond range even unto the realm of government and religion."

Laconic as his own New England characters, Frost does not dwell on the religious aspects of his themes but their reflections are frequently in or between the lines. Inevitably, too, they reflect "the unconscious and innate nobility of the man himself," as one of the critics has said of Robert Frost. "He is deep-rooted in locality and from that physical and spiritual environment he draws his strength."

As would be expected in a man like this, his religion expresses itself chiefly in a philosophical or social form. His Death of the Hired Man leaves nothing more to be said. The scene on the moonlit kitchen porch is as clear as if photographed. His irritated farmer whose strong patience has at last worn to a thread and the understanding and anxious warm-hearted wife are our own neighbors, their conversation, here thoroughly poetical, is yet as real as any we hear everyday. And the object of it all, the wreck of a man asleep by the kitchen stove, is too universal for our comfort.

How can the brief Yankee speech be poetic, we may ask. All speech that comes straight from the heart or that is deeply felt is likely to be rhythmic. And modern critics demand naturalness in poetry. They find scant praise for the artifices of the more classical writers. The words and the rhythms must now be fitted to the people, the places, and the subjects of the poems. As Frost himself says, a complete poem is one wherein an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words.

Death has always been an inevitable theme of the poets. This is particularly true of those who write of nature. Turning back to our earliest American poetry, this was preeminently true of William Cullen Bryant, whose Thanatopsis is a masterpiece on the universe of nature. The theme permeated his poetry. He usually wrote of it in a cosmic sense, uniting it with death and immortality.

But even in earlier years our writers who have devoted themselves to rural themes, not merely using them occasionally, have usually been concerned with the more mundane aspects. They have harnessed nature to the farms, and consider death and divinity in relation to everyday human beings.

The earliest rural poet whose verses all remember was irrevocably of the farm. His warm human story in Snow-Bound marks Whittier as the true fireside poet. Family life at its artless best is there. No danger calls for its heroism, no disaster for

its courage. But forced close proximity of people of different moulds, in unpierced isolation brings out the best in variation and in unity instead of boredom and irritation. Each contributes to the placid drama played out for themselves and for us until outside communication is reestablished.

To read it again is to realize that Whittier made these people at once local and timeless. Moreover, he adapts his words, meter, and rhyme pattern to fit the person he is then describing. Although the long poem is individually his own and is not out of line with the rather imitative writing of his day, to a surprising degree it meets requirements of contemporary critics.

Another mile-stone in the development of our rural poetry in America is personified by Sidney Lanier. Although a lyric poet, whose writing was usually as melodious as the flute with which he earned his living in symphony orchestras, he yet has been called the original southern agrarian. He foresaw the threat of commercialism and industrialism and what it might do to the agricultural South, before others awoke to the danger. His poem called Corn is the best of his poetic prophecies.

Lanier's concern for human values and the risk of losing them in industrialism finds its reflection in some of the young writers of today. Daniel Henderson seems at times a rural poet, and he writes of farm conditions both north and south--The Virginia Colonial Planter and New England Farm among others in his little volume called Frontiers, but young as he is he can turn with savage understanding to the underground and ground-under Coin Watcher at Hudson Tubes, who is filled with hatred of his task. James Still turns occasionally from his verses of the characters and ways of the mountains to write with restrained anger of the life of the coal towns in his new Hounds on the Mountain.

Throughout the years, many of the men we think of in connection with rural poetry were imbued with this social consciousness that bred in them a fierce sympathy for those who were bound in chains however forged. Edwin Markham found them binding a man to his hoe and to intolerable farm conditions. Others, like Carl Sandburg, who are primarily outdoors writers, have found these chains shackling the city laborers. When they lash out at these oppressions, they do work that lives.

Intolerance that is due to isolation and ignorance, and that forms an indictment against the efficacy of civilization, is effective theme for rural verse. Edgar Lee Masters used it in Spoon River Anthology. Madison Cadwein's verse that is built on the Ku Klux Klan, feuds, and lynchings will live when his other work is forgotten. In Elaine Goodale Eastman's The Runaways the elemental and mixed emotions excited in a backwoods neighborhood form a rhythmic beat to which is told a stirring narrative that won last year's award from the Order of Bookfellows.

Prize-award committees frequently pronounce our rural poetry to be the best American poetry of the year. The Pulitzer prize has gone three times to Robert Frost, for his volumes called New Hampshire, Collected Poems, and A Further Range. It has gone to Robert P. Tristram Coffin for Strange Holiness which also won the award of the New England Poetry Society. A Guggenheim Fellowship has been awarded to Jesse Stuart for his Kentucky ballads, more than seven hundred of which appear in his Man with a Bull - Tongue Plow. They are by no means as good as those he will probably write eventually.

A few fragile rural poems still win recognition. The John Burroughs award is given annually for the best piece of nature writing of the year. Usually it goes to well known naturalists. Recently it was conferred with ceremony on a genuine New York farmer, W. W. Christman, who did not have time to write until he was sixty years old. After his lyrical Songs of the Helderhills and Songs of the Western Gateway, his third

little volume called Wild Pasture Pine, met this surprising welcome. A reviewer touched the reason for success when she referred to Christman as one who within his own personality has discovered "the foundations of Heaven and Earth," because of his love for the pervasive beauty of trees, birds, and flowers he knows so well. Coffin wrote him that he was reading the volume for the third time. These poems remind us that although the best writing of today epitomizes the best of realism, rural poetry owes something to the lyrical writers of the past. They were true to their day in writing and we must be true to them.

A group of midwest rural writers a generation ago were among the first to break away from more classical earlier forms using everyday American words and phrases, and writing straight narrative or describing events and scenes that were generally recognized as native and genuine. Therefore the public responded promptly to their homely ballads of the farm. John Hay's Pike County Ballads led the way, followed by Will Carleton's Farm Ballads and Farm Festivals and James Whitcomb Riley's many popular poems devoted to farm people, farm industries, and neighborhood life. Among them they succeeded in bringing American poetry back to the people. Riley was called the People's Laureate.

The community spirit abounding in these ballads of a period in American rural life that is past or passing finds its modern counterpart in phrases of contemporary rural verse "Something there is that doesn't love a wall---" says Robert Frost, while Coffin reads a lesson of both mutual and divine helpfulness when he hears Wild Geese at Night:

It could not be there was no goal,
No plan to pattern, not a soul
Sitting calm somewhere above
With palms above some lamp of love
And planning new and keener things
When these exquisite pairs of wings

Built so clean and strong and right
Helped one another in their flight---

And people hearing them returned
To the slumber they had earned.

The influence of the more robust poets is reflected among the younger poets, in both themes and methods. Robert Francis in his first volume Stand With Me Here is concerned with terse New England characters, even eccentric ones, and he writes in a brief disciplined form. James Hearst publishes a promising first volume this year in the Middle West, Country Men, his homespun titles read like a list from Frost but the verses have a prairie sweep. Other of the new poets suggest other derivations. This is not necessarily imitation and they may be following leads that will break through to newer individualities. Good influences should not be passive. They should be active and creative.

Optimism for the quickening of the spirit of poetry in our daily lives and the quickening of the ability to catch the overtones and to see glimpses of the ultimate in the course of our rural daily rounds may seem far-fetched. There are many obstacles, many influences that would kill them. But if we believe in the power of education and association the fact that most of our rural poets are teaching young men and women every day, in organized classes and in informal singles and groups, must mean a real response. With Robert Frost first at Amherst and now at Harvard, when he is not working his New England farm with his own hands, with Tristram Coffin at Bowdoin College, with Jesse Stuart in his rural school rooms, and with James Still carrying books out through the mountains that surround the Hindman Settlement in Kentucky, and with poets of other themes teaching in many other centers, the spirit of poetry will not die in America.